

The Saga of the Rodeo Grounds

By Donna Anderson

Our Roundup history would not be complete without the “Saga of the Rodeo Grounds.” This property has seen horse races, dancing, gymnastics, cow-milking, baseball games, concerts, parades, horse-pulling contests (with large sums of money wagered) and just about any social activity a typical western community supports.

In July, 1900, Lehi City purchased this property from John Beck. On July 19, some 225 workers turned out to clear the ground and build a dance floor. These enthusiastic volunteers erected a grandstand, built a fence on the northeast side of the property and leveled an area suitable for a baseball diamond.

All was in readiness for the first program and parade at Lehi’s new City Park and an excited crowd gathered to celebrate Utah’s holiday, July 24. Then, on August 2, 1900, many dancers eagerly set about getting work completed including a cover over the floor, by the end of the month. They were concerned about a smoother surface on the dance floor because the rough paneling was hard on boots, shoes but especially, feet. On January 1, 1901, the Grand Sugar Ball was held in Lehi’s new “ballroom.”

From then on, this location became the center of social life in Lehi. There was even a memorial service honoring the assassinated President McKinley on September 19, 1901. Family reunions and parties honoring retiring bishops and some activities involving the “Doughboys” of World War I were staged there.

In 1904, and through the efforts of Willis Whipple, a new maple floor replaced the original planking. By 1914, sport enthusiasts moved in with basketball and volleyball played in this “pavillion.” Gymnastic equipment (trapezes, horizontal bars and swinging rings) and even a wrestling mat were added. It became a popular setting for “Indoor Baseball” games with nights reserved for both boys and girls.

As popular and versatile as this pavillion became, its career was short lived and additional plans for the site necessitated having it moved. In March of 1916, Lehi City offered the pavilion for sale. On March 6, 1919, it was torn down and materials used in the construction of our present Memorial Building.

A “Wild West Show” was presented on June 30, 1921, in the temporary arena. This was followed by the first real rodeo in 1927. January of 1931 saw the formation of a great homecoming celebration to be called Utah Sugar Beet Days. Included in those plans was the enlarging of the rodeo arena and remodeling work necessary to accommodate the new sport and its spectators. In 1932, everyone decided that rodeo was here to stay and an investment of \$25,000 was made in the purchase of chutes, vests and fencing. Later, additional chutes and bleachers were moved from the Evans’ Ranch west of Lehi.

The 1940 Lehi Free Press report of the forthcoming rodeo stated, “Lehi’s rodeo grounds were inspected by official rodeo inspectors. They reported the grounds to be the best rodeo facility in the state with 3,000 seats in the shade.” A large stand of trees provided natural shade and fence along the west side of the property. Their cool, welcome shade attracted children, parade participants and baseball spectators and picnics. The trees have since been removed providing convenient working pens for rodeo stock and the high wooden fence provided protection for the animals and is a great place to announce Roundup dates each year.

Lehi’s rodeo grounds are well-known and appreciated in professional cowboys and stock contractors. The efficient manner in which the rodeo is conducted is also a trademark of the Roundup. One year, Casey Tibbs, the world’s champion cowboy was being featured at the Roundup. He presented himself at the west gate where Robert Allred was stationed. Tibbs, asked to be admitted. Mr. Allred asked for a ticket and because Casey didn’t have a ticket, he was refused admittance. So Casey asked mr. Allred if he knew who he, Casey was. Allred replied, “Not even the Lord could get in here without a ticket!” The next year when

Mr. Allred attended the rodeo convention, the matter of requiring tickets for performers came up for discussion. Casey Tibbs quickly spoke up, saying “in Lehi, Utah, the guy there wouldn’t even let the Lord in without a ticket.”

The grounds are used by high school rodeo clubs, local riding clubs, F.F.A. stock shows, Queen contest, team-roping contest and many individuals who need a place to exercise horses in an ever changing, fast-moving society, we are fortunate to have a place in our community as richly endowed with pioneer and western heritage. We salute those hardy individuals who had the foresight and determination to provide this place where we can round up so many good times and memories.